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ABSTRACT

An attitudinal survey of students enrolled in second language programs in Virginia public schools is reported in this article. Discussion of the results indicates several areas in which language teachers could work toward the improvement of student attitudes and motivation. A principal reason for not continuing with a language program is noted to be loss of interest. (RL)

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The new look in foreign language classes.

The individual student is the focus of attention.

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Student Attitudes Toward Foreign Language Study-Results of a Survey

By Dr. Helen Warriner

Foreign language study in Virginia's public secondary schools has increased dramatically during the last decade. Since 1961 enrollment in French has nearly doubled, more than two and one half times as many students study Spanish, Russian enrollment has doubled, and more than six times as many students study German.

On the other hand, enrollment in Latin has declined 50 percent since the beginning of the decade. There are encouraging signs even in this language, however, because despite this decrease many more students continue the study of Latin beyond the second year. Some teachers have changed materials, approaches, and sometimes even objectives that guide instruction, and they are attracting more students into the classrooms.

The growth and development of the foreign language program have opened the door to innovations which include: discussion classes conducted mostly by students and entirely in the foreign language they are studying; advanced students serving as instructors or tutors for beginning or intermediate students; and history classes taught in a foreign language.

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Educators cannot be satisfied with these developments, however. Far too many students still do not continue language study long enough to master the basic skills or to develop an appreciation for the people whose language they are studying. Even though more than 5,000 students are engaged in foreign language study at the fourth-year level of instruction or above, this number is less than 10 percent of those who originally enrolled in the subject.

Concerned by this fact, the Foreign Language Service and the Division of Research and Statistics of the State Department of Education conducted a survey in May 1970 to learn more about student attitudes and opinions concerning foreign language study. Approximately 4,100 seniors in 32 high schools of various types in all areas of the State responded to the questionnaire.

Some of the questions asked on the survey and the percentage of students choosing each response are shown in the following tabulation:

1. My foreign language teachers were:
   - men. 5%
   - women. 73%
   - men and women. 22%
2. I think that knowledge of a foreign language is:
   - very useful. 30%
   - moderately useful. 46%

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of little use.	20%
of no use.	4%

3. Generally speaking, I consider the foreign language courses that I have studied:

very well taught.	24%
moderately well taught.	50%
not very well taught.	19%
poorly taught.	7%

4. I enjoyed studying a foreign language:

very much.	25%
somewhat.	42%
very little.	21%
not at all.	12%

5. I plan to teach a foreign language:

yes.	1%
no.	94%
uncertain.	5%

6. I think that foreign languages are:

equally appealing to both boys and girls.	59%
more appealing to boys.	1%
more appealing to girls.	40%

7. Generally speaking, my grades in foreign languages were:

higher than those in my other subjects.	12%
lower than those in my other subjects.	31%
about the same as those in my other subjects.	57%

8. If I were taking all five of the following subjects and had the opportunity to drop one, I would choose to drop:

English.	7%
Foreign Language.	34%
Math.	30%
Science.	18%
Social Studies.	11%

Six hundred and forty-two students in the group responding failed a foreign language class. This group answered question 9.

9. I failed a high school subject other than a foreign language.

yes.	374
no.	268

Students could provide as many as 12 responses to the following questions which sought to ascertain why they elected a foreign language. The numbers in this case do not indicate the number of students responding, but the relative importance of the reasons. For example, college entrance requirements drew the largest number of responses while the foreign language teacher's advice was lowest in the rankings. (The reasons originally appeared in a different order from that which appears here. The order has been changed for the convenience of the reader.)

10. College requirements

My own interest	2
High school graduation (for certain diplomas)	3
Counselor's advice	4
Parents' advice	5
Career purposes	6
Everyone in my grade (elementary school) had to take a foreign language.	7
Residence or travel in a foreign country	8
Friend's advice	9
Other teacher's advice	10
Acquaintance with native speakers residing or traveling in the United States	11
Foreign language teacher's advice	12

Many of the answers to the questions are self-explanatory. The number of female instructors greatly outranks the number of male foreign language instructors (question 1). The majority of students felt that the study of a foreign language is worthwhile (question 2) and that the classes were at least moderately well taught (question 3).

The response to the question about their enjoyment of foreign language instruction (number 4) was similar: approximately one-fourth of them enjoyed it to some degree, or not at all. Only one percent or 42 students planned to teach a foreign language, but another five percent were considering this career (question 5).

Fifty-nine percent of the students thought that foreign languages were equally as appealing to boys as girls; but of those who disagreed, nearly all were of the opinion that languages hold more appeal for girls than for boys (question 6).

Fifty-seven percent received grades in foreign language classes that were comparable to those in their other classes (question 7). Of those whose foreign language grades were not in line with their other grades, more than twice as many received lower grades in foreign language classes than they did higher grades.

One result that should be studied by foreign language teachers and administrators is that foreign languages are less popular with students than English, social studies, the sciences, and mathematics.

Question 10 confirms what most people know: that most students are headed for college and take a for-

Foreign language students learn by working together.

eign language to fulfill entrance requirements. Interestingly enough, however, the second most influential factor was their own interest in foreign language study. This reason, apparently an intrinsic one, outranked all extrinsic ones, such as the counselor's advice, with the exception of preparation for college.

Some may question why foreign language teachers do not have more influence over the students' election of foreign languages. There is probably more than one explanation, but it is possible that language teachers do not come into contact with most students until they are already enrolled in their classes or unless they have them in homeroom groups. Career purposes ranked moderately high among the reasons for studying foreign languages; and since few of the students plan to teach a language, one might assume that languages are looked upon as a supportive discipline for other careers.

Visual aids are essential in contemporary foreign language teaching.

One of the most significant questions in the survey asked students to indicate the factors which caused them to fail a foreign language class or to drop foreign language study when they could have continued. The following list shows the most significant reasons chosen by the students of each language for dropping or failing the language. The numbers indicate the rank importance of the reasons.

Reason	French	Spanish	German	Latin
1. I lost interest in studying the language.	1	1	1	1
2. I had all the language I needed for college entrance.	2	3	5	5
3. I was not learning enough to justify the time.	3	6	8	11
4. The language as it was taught was not relevant and worthwhile.	4	8	3	9
5. I had a poor background for the next level.	5	19	11	16.5
6. I did not need the credit.	6	2	7	6.5
7. We were not learning to speak the language.	7	16	2	6.5
8. I just did not feel anymore language was worthwhile.	8	5	9	13
9. I was lazy and did not study.	9	9	13	10
10. The language became more difficult and I could not keep up any longer.	10	13	12	15
11. I preferred to study another subject instead of language.	11	10	16	16.5
12. There was too much memorizing.	12	4	4	18
13. The quality of instruction was poor.	13	18		
14. We were not learning to understand the spoken language.	14	15	16	
15. We tried to cover too much too fast.	15	7	20	
16. I did not like the teacher.	16	17	14	20.5
17. The repetition was boring.	17	11	6	14
18. The time necessary for language study was hurting my grades in other subjects.	18	14		12

19. I only intended to take it for this long.	19	12	18	2
20. I did not have enough time to study the language as much as I should.	20	20	10	19
21. There was too much translation.				3.5
22. I wanted to switch to another language which I thought I would like better.				3.5
23. I wanted to switch to another language which I thought would be more beneficial to me.				8
24. The language was too hard for me.				20.5

In many instances students gave similar responses concerning the foreign languages included in the survey. In all cases the primary influence was the fact that for one reason or another the students lost interest. Likewise, completion of college entrance requirements ranked high among all languages (2, 3, 5, 5). Differences do appear, however. Reason three indicates that the students felt that the time for Latin study is more justifiable than it is for the modern languages. An obvious difference between Latin and modern language students appears in reason 19 and reflects the fact that many Latin students only intended to take the subject for a short period of time. It appears that German teachers do not stress speaking the language as much as other modern language teachers do since reason seven was the second most important factor causing the students to discontinue study of that language.

An analysis of these top reasons given indicates that some are teacher influences, some are related to the nature of the student, some are circumstantial, and some perhaps overlap among these categories. Reason number two, college entrance requirements, is a circumstantial factor. Not needing the credit also falls within this category. Among the student-generated reasons are those such as number nine, the failure to study; number 11, preference for another subject; and numbers 22 and 23, preference for another foreign language. Teacher factors seem to enter strongly into the reasons for dropping or failing a foreign language. Replies to question number four show students feel that the way the foreign language was taught caused them to decide that the subject was not worthwhile. Number 10 implies that teachers lose students because the instruction becomes progressively more demanding as they advance within the sequence of courses. French and Latin students cite reason 12, too much memorization, which is probably a teacher-generated factor, as an important one. The poor quality of instruction was ranked near the twentieth top reason by students of all languages. Likewise, many of the students did not like the teacher as is shown in reason 16.

The results emphasized above and the few analyses presented are only exemplary. Foreign language teachers, supervisors, and other administrators should studiously examine the results in the survey in order to seek information that would lead to the improvement of foreign language instruction and the ability to hold more students within longer program sequences. Why do students prefer to drop their foreign language class over their other courses? Why do many students receive lower grades in foreign languages, or why is the tendency to fail a language greater than it is for other subjects? Why do students say that the second most important factor in electing a foreign language in the first place was their own interest and then later that the primary reason for dropping or failing is the loss of interest?

If foreign language teachers do not now influence students significantly in choosing to take a foreign language, should this be so? Should teachers make more efforts toward public relations for their discipline?

German students indicate that they were not learning to speak the language and many dropped out because of it. Should this be so? Memorization seems to be a negative factor for foreign language study. Can methods be altered to avoid so much memorization and still permit the achievement of the basic objectives? Why don't some students like their foreign language teachers? Can the popularity of that reason be explained by rationalizing that most students who fail any class do not like their teacher?

Foreign language teachers need not develop an inferiority complex over the results of this survey. Dropouts and failures in other disciplines would most likely present their instructors and administrators with similar information. But they are responsible for the quality of instruction in foreign language. It is encumbent upon all who are concerned with foreign language teaching to use all available means to improve instruction. The results of this survey provide helpful information that can be used for this purpose.

The original survey instrument is available from the State Department of Education for use by individual teachers, schools, or school divisions. ■